



Iraqi police from Najaf Province perform box drills during training exercises.

Look Outside the Station Walls for Iraqi Police Change

By Captain David M. O'Dea

Within a few hours of arrival in Najaf, Iraq, in July 2003, the 2d Platoon, 988th Military Police Company from Fort Benning, Georgia, was placed in charge of the Kufa Police Station and the 300 Iraqi police who secured that critical district. The 988th Military Police Company, as part of the 716th Military Police Battalion and in conjunction with the 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, and later multinational forces, also had to secure the holy city of Najaf as part of its mission.

Najaf is unique in Iraq for many reasons. The locals are fond of saying that the politics in the city reach back thousands of years. Every building or holy site seems to have a story, and everyone in the city knows Najaf's history and feels a fervent desire to declare that he is a Najafi. In many respects, Najaf is to Shiite Islam what the Vatican is to Roman Catholicism. It is the center of gravity for Islamic religious leaders, who sometimes fight each other through surrogates. To survive and accomplish anything in Najaf required an understanding of the politics involved. To build and staff a police station required developing relationships and making dramatic structural realignments.

According to American soldiers who have been in charge of Iraqi police, one central challenge to rebuilding the police is a lack of Iraqi leaders. A fundamentally different organizational approach has left a gap between officers, who may do nothing, and regular beat cops, who often execute missions without any guidance. Noncommissioned officers (NCOs) do not exist in the Iraqi police, and the lack of sergeants leaves little direct supervision. When the 988th Military Police Company first arrived in Najaf, Iraqi police officers were more intent on drawing pay than in leading. The beat cops were more interested in drinking tea and sleeping than in staying out on active patrols. After six weeks of trying conventional methods of reprimanding, training, and teaching, with only modest temporary success, it became apparent that a new approach would be needed in the Kufa Police Station.

The first phase of this process was to find out how many Iraqi police officers there actually were and what their organization looked like. It became clear that many Iraqi police officers drew pay without attendance and that few in the Iraqi police leadership cared about this, so long as they drew their own pay.

Also, many of the senior Iraqi police leaders at the station were actively stealing thousands of dollars per month from police payroll funds. Through reliable translators and solid police work, US military police were able to expose the corrupt police officers and obtain criminal convictions through Iraqi courts. By making a strong example of corrupt police officers early on, US forces attacked the heart of an internal patronage system that allowed officers to buy their way out of work. This gave the American military police a grasp on Iraqi police officer accountability, and the Iraqi police began to understand that unethical behavior would be confronted and dealt with severely.

Still lacking in the Iraqi police force were true leaders willing to step up and take charge of the station without direct American leadership. Those leaders within the police force often were looking only to profit personally from their positions, while ignoring corruption in their own ranks. Such was the status quo under the old regime. With this embedded, systemic corruption, it became clear that the solution to police leadership was not within the police force itself. The solution was to look outside the police force for real leaders. It became obvious that the strongest Iraqi police leaders were those who had military experience and that to get the station functional, US forces needed to shift everything dynamically.

The 988th Military Police Company selected a junior Iraqi police captain, who recently had served as a captain in the army, to take charge of the police station. He was promoted to police chief because of his leadership on numerous warrants and high-risk missions when other career Iraqi police leaders had shied away. While other leaders hid, he stood out front, giving an operational order on the mission to be conducted. He was a natural leader who spoke English well and demonstrated his reliability on multiple sensitive missions. The 988th Military Police Company gave him the mandate to fix the organization, put the best people in charge, and run the station as it watched closely.

To handle ethical violations in the station, the company also created the first internal affairs division at the Kufa Police Station. It staffed the division with a reliable individual, another former military leader who had demonstrated his utility to the coalition and to other police officials. By hiring individuals from outside the police force and putting individuals who had not grown up in the bribery- and coercion-based police system in charge, the

organization got reliable leaders who took responsibility for the station. The company's approach was quite simple—it could teach strong leaders how to manage police, but it could not make unethical leaders honest.

With new leaders in charge, a clear picture of the organization emerged, with officers leading sections and beat cops having a leader who accounted for them each day. This approach was so successful—and Kufa's progress so clear—that the US commander directed that one American NCO be placed in charge of two or three police sections, such as "shift work" or "investigations," to mentor and assist Iraqi counterparts in building the Iraqi section. With new leaders in place, the American signature was reduced after just four months from a full platoon required 24 hours a day, to one officer and four NCOs required for just four hours daily to supervise an entirely Iraqi-run operation. By empowering Iraqi police to take ownership and by establishing clear expectations, what had been a daunting and sometimes repetitive task became one where the company's presence became almost unnecessary. Iraqi leaders took pride in being in charge of the most professional station in the province.

Iraqi SWAT Teams

Iraq, with help from US trainers, plans to have special weapons and tactics (SWAT) teams in each of 20 major Iraqi cities. Teams have already served as quick reaction forces during the January national elections. The Basra SWAT team was also a major player in a successful raid on an improvised explosive device factory in that city.

Four weeks of specialized training cover basic human relations, police conduct, weapons training, mechanical breaching procedures, and close-quarters combat. The final week focuses on specialties like sniper operations, offensive driving, and surveillance techniques.

Seven teams have been trained and equipped and two more are in training, according to officials at the Multinational Security Transition Command-Iraq.

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